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Why North Carolina Claims the Designer of the "Stars and Bars", First Flag of the Confederacy

(By Mrs. Fannie Ransom Williams, Newton, N.C.)

Before giving the many reasons why North Carolina claims that Orren Randolph Smith was the designer of the "Stars and Bars", the first flag selected by the Provisional Congress at Montgomery, Alabama, in 1861, it seems but fitting that something should be known of the history of the man to whom this honor is due.

Orren Randolph Smith was born in that good old county of Warren, a county that had given to the "Old North State" so many sons of illustrious fame, and whose women have won for themselves honor and glory for their education, high Christian character and noble Southern instincts. Born in 1827, Mr. Smith had barely reached his twentieth year when he volunteered in Company H, First North Carolina Volunteers, and went forth to fight Mexico in behalf of his country. In this war he served under General Taylor with great ability. When hostilities closed he continued in the United States Army, serving as Captain in the Utah troubles in 1857-58 under that gallant leader, and later noted Confederate general, Albert Sidney Johnson. When the State of North Carolina seceded in 1861 Orren Randolph Smith, true to his soldierly instinct, volunteered in Company B. 2nd N. C. battalion, and later, his arm having been so injured as to prevent his handling a gun efficiently, he was promoted to major in the Commissary Department of the Confederacy with headquarters at Marion, S. C. Such was the man, and such his knowledge of what the flag of his country meant to a soldier, whom North Carolina has shown to the world as the designer of the "First Flag of the Confederate States of America."

Like all Confederate soldiers, when the flag they loved was furled forever as a national flag, and became one of sweet memories only, Mr.

Smith talked not for many years of what he had done regarding the flag. Bitter thoughts and deepest sorrows take time to heal, and the Confederate soldier spoke not of the glories of those hard fought years until time had passed, and the South began again to come into its own. Then we began to hear by degrees of the many things that had lain hidden.

In an address that Mr. Smith had intended to deliver on this occasion when the flag committee of the North Carolina Division U. C. V. read its report on who was the designer of the Stars and Bars, and at which time he had intended to present a large silk replica of the original to his old comrades in arms, we find the reasons given for the designing of the flag. The writer, however, was never permitted to tell his own story, for the Angel of Death calls him, but the story remained intact, and from it we quote Mr. Smith's own words. He says: "Having been with Taylor in 1846 in that war that gave the Southwest from the Rio Grande to the Pacific to the United States, and with Albert Sidney Johnston in Utah in 1858, I knew that a soldier's flag should have the deepest, truest significance, not be simply a blurring of bright colors. His flag is his inspiration. It stands for Home, Kindred and Country. It had so much meaning to me that I hoped that my flag would tell the story to all who saw it. So when I saw the notice (from the Flag Committee of Congress at Montgomery) of "Flag Wanted" I was ready. In 1861 I was living in Louisburg, N. C. and I went to my old friend Miss Becky Murphy, now Mrs. W. B. Winborne of Wilson, N. C., and asked her to put the stitches in a little flag for me, and I tore the Bars and cut the Stars while she sewed.

The idea of my flag I took from the Trinity--Three in One--. The three bars were the Church, State and Press. Red represented State,

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Legislative, Judiciary and Executive; White for Church, Father, Son and Holy Ghost; Red for Press, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Conscience, Liberty of Press, all bound together by a field of blue, the heavens over all, bearing a star for each State in the Confederacy. The seven white stars, all the same size, were placed in a circle, showing that each State had equal Rights and Privileges, irrespective of size or population. The circle having neither head nor foot signified "You defend me, and I'll protect you'".

This description of the flag together with Mr. Smith's reasons for each were later embodied in an affidavit, prepared from the manuscript in his own handwriting, and filed with the many others, submitted to various committees appointed to investigate his claims as designer of the first Confederate flag.

In the statement above given we find Mr. Smith telling of his visit to Miss Murphy, later Mrs. Winborne, and we will now see what Mrs. Winborne has to say in her affidavit on the subject, as sworn to by her on June 30, 1913. She swears - "When the War Between the States began I was living at my old home, Louisburg, North Carolina, the widow of Mr. George Watson. And since I have been asked to tell all I know of the designing and making of the Confederate flag, known as the Stars and Bars, I consider it both duty and privilege to make this affidavit so that in the days to come there may be no doubt as to the identity of the man who designed the Stars and Bars, the first flag of the Confederate States of America. Early in 1861, the second week in February, my old friend, Orren Randolph Smith, brought me some material and asked me to make him a flag and that he would tell me exactly how to do it, for the Confederacy had decided that a new flag was to be used in the War for States Rights, and a Committee had been appointed to decide on a model, and this committee had

advertised for models, and he, Mr. Smith, wanted to have this little flag of his own design to send as a model.

The design that I copied was composed of a blue field and three stripes, one white between two red, and on the blue field, which extended across the end of the white and one red stripe, I sewed seven white stars in a circle, a star for each state that up to that time had seceded.

This small flag was about a foot long. The design was made by Orren Randolph Smith in Louisburg, North Carolina, and the flag was made by me under his direction, and when finished was packed and sent to Montgomery, Alabama, and was later the design selected without any alterations by the Committee, as all the world knows, and everywhere it is honored and treated with reverence. As soon as Mr. Smith learned the design was accepted as the flag of "The Confederate States of America", the day following, he again came to me and brought materials to make a large flag in accordance with his model, and with my assistance a large flag, identical in every particular with the small model sent to Montgomery, was made. We enjoyed our work, talking and laughing as old friends do when together and interested in their work, and then we had no idea of the terrible struggle that was coming, nor of the fierce fighting that was to be done under and for this flag. We sewed and worked on the large flag as hard as we could and did not get it finished by Saturday night, so we completed it on Sunday, March 17, 1861, and early Monday morning Mr. Smith raised this flag in Louisburg, it being the first Confederate flag ever displayed in North Carolina, and two months before the Old North State left the Union.

Over the flag Mr. Smith had floating to the breeze a long blue pennant, like an admiral's pennant on his ship when homeward bound,

and on this pennant were nine white stars. He said that though North Carolina was still in the Union she was homeward bound. This was the first significant straw that showed which way the wind was blowing."

Such were the statements made by the designer of the flag model, Oren Randolph Smith, and his principal assistant, Rebecca Murphy Winborne.

In all historical questions, and especially when the question has been challenged, it is wise that the true side of that question be known to all those claiming it. Such is the question as to the Designer of the Stars and Bars, the first flag of the Confederacy.

North Carolina has made its claim to this honor in the name of Orren Randolph Smith of Louisburg. All claims and proof of this claim were laid before the four Confederate organizations of this country and each appointed a committee to investigate the matter, and three, the United Confederate Veterans, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, and the Confederated Memorial Association, gave the honor to North Carolina and named Orren Randolph Smith as the designer, and it was upon this decision that the fountain in honor of Mr. Smith was erected in Louisburg.

But very many of the North Carolina Daughters have not seen the proof on which these organizations acted. The writer has seen it in the original, which is in the files of the Historical Association Library in Raleigh.

In conceding the proof of any historical question, three things should be considered: first, the testimony of the claimant to an honor and his direct connection with it; second, proof of those directly connected with the subject, other than the claimant; and third, the opinion regarding the matter by neighbors and friends.

Answering the first, we have the written statement of Major Smith

himself, that when he saw a flag design for the Confederacy advertised he at once conceived the idea of the Stars and Bars design, that he modeled it as nearly as possible after the Stars and Stripes, for he loved and had fought under its folds, but he was a rank secessionist. He tells of taking the material ~~of~~ to Miss Rebecca Murphy, afterwards Mrs. Winborne, and getting her to make a small flag according to his idea, of sending this small flag to Montgomery sometime in February. That when he heard this design had been accepted, he went to a dry goods store, secured the dress goods, and again sought the aid of Mrs. Murphy-Winborne and had a large flag of the identical design made and raised in Louisburg on March 18, 1861. In the original design of the Stars and Bars Major Smith placed seven stars on the blue field, for then only seven states had seceded, but he tells us he said "A new star should be added as each new state secedes." Such in brief is Major Smith's sworn statement, omitting description and reasons for which we have no space.

Our second proof lies in the affidavit of Mrs. Rebecca Murphy-Winborne which tells very clearly how Major Smith came and asked her to make the small flag according to his design, how she did so as he sat by, and how said flag was sent by mail to Montgomery along the first of February. She also tells of Major Smith's bringing her the goods to make the large flag as soon as he heard the design had been chosen. How she sewed day and night even on Sunday so as to complete it for the raising on Monday morning March 18, 1861 in Louisburg.

We have the sworn affidavit of Mrs. Jasper Suggs of Tarboro that she saw Mrs. Rebecca Murphy Winborne make the small design for Maj. Smith, that she knew it was sent to Montgomery, and that the Stars and Bars selected was exactly Major Smith's design, and that she also saw Mrs. Winborne make the large flag.

Besides Mrs. Suggs' there are on file affidavits to the effect that Mrs. Winborne made the small flag from M. A. Herring, Adam Ball, T. S.Collins, Eugene T. Cooke, H. D. Edgerton, F. N. Edgerton, and W. H. H. Hill. The proof that the large flag raised in March 1861 was like the small one affidavits were made by Mrs. J. A. Jones, W. P. Montgomery, Sarah E. Place, and W. H. Pleasants.

The following persons certify that the small flag was sent to Montgomery the second week in February--M. A. Herring, Mrs. J. A. Jones, Adam Ball, T. S. Collins and the others who certified that Mrs. Winborne made the design. M. A. Herring also certifies that he knew Major Smith knew his design was accepted.

So much for the proof that Orren Randolph Smith designed the Stars and Bars, that Mrs. Rebecca Murphy Winborne made it and that it was mailed to Montgomery the middle of February.

Now as to what became of it after reaching Montgomery. There is no proof of the newspaper statement that the committee to select the flag design designed the Stars and Bars themselves. After telling us of the numerous designs sent in, General Wm. P. Miles, Chairman of the Provisional Congress committee on the design, tells how the designs were divided into two classes, those resembling the United States flag and those of most ornate design. The report to Congress does not claim that the committee designed a flag, but only that it submitted a design. In sending in its report the committee tells what kind of a design they think should be selected and then says "The flag we submit answers all these requisites", and that flag was the one designed by Major Smith and made by Mrs. Winborne. In a letter written many years after the report to the Provisional Congress, General Miles states that the committee, being unable to select a design, placed four designs on the walls of Congress hall and let the members select

the design. But the report does not say so, although this may have been done.

It would be a strange coincident that Orren Randolph Smith, as proven by affidavits of most worthy people, should have designed a flag identical with the Stars and Bars accepted, that Mrs. Winborne should have made up the design in cloth, that several swore they saw her make it, that a number knew that flag went to Montgomery the middle of February, that Congress selected a flag design exactly in every way identical with that of the North Carolina man's, and yet someone else designed it. Common sense shows us that either Major Smith did design the Stars and Bars or else all that array of noble North Carolina born and bred men and women deliberately perjured themselves by making false statements under oath. North Carolinians and Southern men and women of the old school were far too noble and high minded for that.

In conclusion let us say that no claim was ever made that Orren Randolph Smith raised the first Confederate flag at Louisburg. The first Stars and Bars flew over the building when Congress met in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 4, 1861, and was raised by Miss Letitia Tyler, the daughter of Ex-President Tyler.

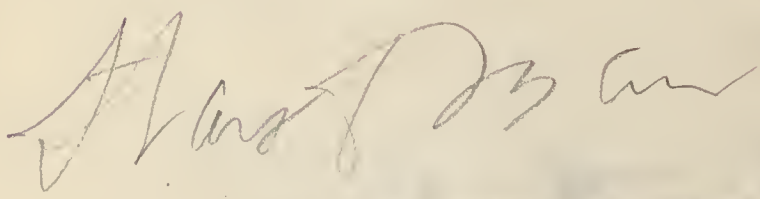
When all proofs in the way of affidavits had been secured, this was presented to a committee appointed by the North Carolina Legislature in 1917, and on the 28th of February a bill was introduced, which passed both House and Senate, worded as follows:

"Whereas, a Committee of the United Confederate Veterans was appointed in 1914, to investigate the date, origin, etc., of the First Flag, adopted by the Confederate States of America, and the said committee, after thoroughly investigating the evidence submitted, reported

at the reunion, held in Richmond, Virginia, 1915, that the first flag known as "The Stars and Bars" was designed by the late Major Orren Randolph Smith, of North Carolina, and that the said design being transmitted to the Confederate States Congress, sitting at Montgomery, Alabama, was duly adopted by that body, March 4, 1861; and that said flag was first displayed in this state by being hoisted to the mast head of a flag pole in the town of Louisburg, North Carolina, on the 18th day of March, 1861, and that a copy of the same was presented on the 27th day of April, 1861, by the ladies of Louisburg, North Carolina, to the Franklin Rifles, commanded by Capt. W. F. Green, which company was later known as Company "K," of the Third North Carolina Regiment;

Now therefore, the report of the said committee of the United Confederate Veterans which was unanimously adopted by the United Confederate Veterans at Richmond, June 2nd, 1915, expresses our belief of the true historical facts, and the said report is endorsed and ratified by this General Assembly."

Such is the clear proof that North Carolina has given to show her claims for Orren Randolph Smith, as designer of the first flag of the Confederacy. In doing so no fight is made on another, but when a number on sworn statement declare that any one thing has been done, and results tend to prove the truth of that assertion, as in the case of the designing and making of the model, and then the selection of this identical model as the first flag of the Confederacy, it certainly stands to reason that the design so presented was the one chosen. And on this fact and these affidavits North Carolina claims the right of having the flag designer as one of her native sons.

In recognition of Orren Randolph Smith as designer of the Stars

and Bars and also of the fact that he raised a facsimile of this design in his home town of Louisburg on March 18, 1861, the North Carolina Division U. D. C. designed and bestowed on him a beautiful gold medal, and in 1923 erected a marble drinking fountain on the court square in Louisburg to mark the spot where the first flag of the Confederacy was raised in North Carolina. The Division also placed a beautiful monument, bearing the design of this same flag, over the grave of Mrs. Rebecca Murphy Winborne, thus showing to all future generations, that she was the Betsy Ross of the Confederacy.